Statement by Salem Azzam,
Press Conference
18 September 1989
Istanbul

المجلس الاسلامي
Islamic Council

Dear brothers and sisters,

Assalaam Alaikum wa Rahmatullah wa Barakatuhu.

Before coming to the purpose of this press conference, I should like to introduce the Islamic Council to you very briefly.

Based in London, the Islamic Council is an independent, non-governmental organisation devoted to the cause of Islam and Muslim peoples. One of its important activities is the promotion of the respect for the Islamic code of human rights in Muslim lands. The Council also concerns itself with numerous issues and problems affecting Muslim peoples, for example the persecution of Muslim minorities in various parts of the world, and countering false and misleading propoganda against Islam and Muslims.

We are holding this press conference in Turkey to reiterate our solidarity with our Bulgarian Muslim brothers and sisters who have taken refuge in Turkey, and to declare our support for the stand taken by the government and people of Turkey on the issue of the persecution of Bulgaria's Muslim minority. We have chosen to hold this press conference in Istanbul because of Turkey's direct and deep involvement in this issue.

Dear brothers and sisters,

The great human tragedy which we are witnessing today began many years ago in the neighbouring country of Bulgaria. The tragedy

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is not the result of natural calamity but has stemed from the extreme intolerance and bigotry of the atheist regime in Bulgaria. I will not go into the ghastly details of the atrocities committed by the Bulgarian authorities on its Muslim minority of Turkish origin. You are, no doubt, fully informed on them. These people have been the victims of state brutality not because of their ethnic origin but because of their Islamic faith and because they boldly refused to give up their Islamic identity. We salute the brave and honourable Muslims of Bulgaria for valuing their Islamic identity above everything else.

The issue is, therefore, not an ethnic issue: it is an Islamic issue and deserves unreserved moral and political support and generous financial assistance from Muslim governments, organisations and individuals.

The Islamic Council first took up the matter of the persecution of Bulgaria's Muslim minority some five years ago. On 28 January 1985 I wrote a letter to the Bulgarian ambassador in London protesting against the violation of human rights of Bulgarian Muslims by the Bulgarian authorities and asked him to inform his government of the grave concern felt by Muslims throughout the world and to take necessary steps to redress the situation. Since then we have had several further contacts with the Bulgarian authorities through their London Embassy. In addition, we have worked hard to involve other human rights organisations, such as Amnesty International, in our campaign on this issue.

On 11 August this year we issued a strongly worded press release which was widely distributed. While condemning the Bulgarian authorities' blatant violation of human rights of their Muslim minority, the statement made an urgent appeal to governments, organisations and individuals for financial and material help to ameliorate the plight of Bulgarian Muslim refugees in Turkey.

We also sent cables addressed personally to heads of several affluent Muslim states asking for urgent financial and material assistance. I am pained to say that their response was most disappointing. The states I approached have been endowed by Allah with abundant riches, and could easily have spared some. We deplore the callous attitude of the rulers who did not come forward with help for their suffering Muslim brothers and sisters.

The Islamic Council is deeply distressed about the plight of our Bulgarian Muslim brothers and sisters forced to flee their homes and to take refuge in Turkey, and wishes to help them to the best of its limited resources. I have, therefore, great pleasure in presenting a cheque for two hundred million liras for this purpose.

I take this opportunity to once again call upon Muslim governments, especially of the affluent Muslim states, organisations and philanthropic individuals to donate generously for the cause of the suffering Bulgarian Muslim refugees in Turkey. The fast approaching winter will worsen the hardships of these people. I fervently hope and pray that Muslim governments and peoples will not abandon them.

Brothers and sisters,

I thank all of you here today and would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Thank you.